[**Why a national image matters**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1606151/why-a-national-image-matters)

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PRIME MINISTER Imran Khan made [a number of assertions](https://www.dawn.com/news/1604126) recently at the launch of a documentary film about the irrelevance of promoting a ‘soft image’ of the country. These statements warrant comment as the prime minister isn’t alone in holding these views. Other people also subscribe to this opinion.

The prime minister said that the people of Pakistan should not be concerned about creating a ‘soft image’ of the country only to please outsiders, specifically the West. He asked a rhetorical question: what does a ‘soft image’ really mean? Will creating such an image mean the “world will consider us as very good?” This, he argued, only reflects an inferiority complex and the mark of people who lack self-confidence. Only an independent and confident nation commands the respect of others.

The prime minister is right that an image should not be manufactured merely to please others. That would never work as any hollow characterisation bereft of reality will lack credibility. There can also be no disagreement with his assertion that national confidence comes from “standing on one own’s feet” and not relying on aid or borrowing from outside. However, the projection of a ‘soft image’ that he regards as futile seems to be based on a misunderstanding and is at odds with what he has said at other times. He has often stated how tourism and Pakistan’s scenic beauty can help to promote the country’s image and attract more visitors. Also, at the same launch event he lamented how PTV dramas no longer attract overseas audiences as they once did, which again contradicts the view that the country’s image is of little significance.

Soft power efforts are imperative for Pakistan to correct misperceptions and project its many positive attributes.

The expression ‘soft image’ is often used in Pakistan but without any real understanding of what it means or encompasses. There is even less awareness about what ‘soft power’ is, what constitutes it and why countries, big and small, deploy it to advance their goals in the world. Put simply, a positive image of a country reflects and generates soft power.

The image of a country obviously derives from its various attributes — society, culture, values, economy and politics. Every country has strengths and weaknesses. Emphasising the positive aspects of a country is not about pleasing others or being defensive. In fact, not doing so allows rivals or adversaries to define you and seize the narrative, to the country’s detriment.

Turning to the concept of soft power, its greater importance today is a consequence of our changing times. In a world fundamentally transformed by technological and scientific advances as well as the information revolution the nature of power has also been changing. Widely accepted is the fact that military and economic power are not the only determinants of a country’s international standing and clout. Nor are they regarded adequate any more to guarantee success in securing foreign policy goals. Increasingly a country’s reputation and positive image count and play a pivotal role in earning respect and enhancing its diplomatic weight in international affairs.

Harvard scholar Joseph Nye, who introduced the notion of soft power, defined it as the ability to shape the preferences of others and achieve outcomes through “attraction” rather than coercion or economic incentives. He counterposed the soft power of “persuasion and cooption”, to the “power of coercion” represented by the hard power of military and economic strength. And he saw culture, political values and foreign policy as the main sources of soft power.

Other scholarly studies point out that a range of diverse attributes can comprise soft power resources. They include a country’s governance and human rights record, its educational, scientific and technological prowess, culture and heritage, media and communication, entertainment, tourist attractions, business practices, and of course its foreign policy conduct.

The world’s most powerful states, that possess formidable military and economic strength — and ‘stand on their own feet’ — use soft power in their strategies, and spend a great deal of resources on this, not because they lack confidence, but as this helps to magnify their influence and supplement their ‘hard power’. Western countries have long been practising this while China is now investing heavily in soft power projection and making vigorous efforts to win hearts and minds globally.

Building a positive image as part of a soft power strategy is even more important for developing and smaller countries in order to raise their standing and enhance their outreach in a crowded international environment. In an increasingly multipolar and hyperconnected world, power is much more dispersed between and within states. This drives the need to influence a diverse array of actors and many more nations in pursuit of foreign policy goals. Soft power not just aims at influencing policymakers in other countries but also their publics whose opinion can impact on government policy to support a country’s objectives. Similarly, international opinion matters as it creates perceptions about a country that can help or hinder its ability to achieve its foreign policy goals. Thus, soft power efforts are crucial to positively shape perceptions abroad and ensure that a country’s narrative is heard and accepted.

Endeavours to build a good image and be ‘liked’ in the world enables countries — powerful and not so powerful — to more effectively promote economic (trade and investment) and diplomatic goals (eliciting cooperation to advance core interests). ‘National branding’ represents a key part of these efforts and seeks to convert soft power resources into an identifiable ‘brand’ to attract others. Again, it is a way to engage international attention to promote a country’s economic and commercial interests in competitive global markets.

For Pakistan, which has long suffered from international image problems, in part due to mis-characterisations and deliberate distortions and partly because of on-ground realities, it is even more imperative to undertake soft power efforts to ­correct misperceptions, and more importantly, to project its many positive socioeconomic attributes and rich heritage of arts, civilisation and culture. This requires, for a start, official recognition that the endeavour is vital for the pursuit of its national goals and foreign policy interests. It needs, above all, imagination to craft such a strategy and ­incorporate it into its otherwise staid diplomacy.

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